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REVIEW ARTICLE

GLOBAL POSITIONING IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE HUNGRY TIDE

Global Positioning in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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As we move towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century and debates about globalization gather ever-increasing momentum as part of the staple fare of academic discourse, not to mention everyday life, one of the dilemmas facing much Indian writing in English relates to ownership. *Who* is writing, who is publishing their work and who are they publishing it for? For Indian and Indian-diaspora writers publishing their work in the West, the dynamics of metropolitan publishing seem to be encouraging an encounter with alterity, but the terms of this encounter are being brokered by Western-based, globalized perceptions of the market.

Or so it would seem. From one point of view at least, the products of the 'alterity industry' could be seen as a modern-day equivalent of those derring-do tales of Empire, which transported their readers to faraway imaginaries. Now-a-days, though, the geographical distances have shrunk and one of the by-products of writing about the places has, of course, been that it helps to stimulate tourism in locations popularized by best-sellers set in 'foreign' climes, taking readers of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* to Cefalonia, readers of *The God of Small Things* to Kerala and so on. A consequence is that Indian novels published in the West with supposedly progressive agendas run the risk of being co-opted into very different economics. That at least is how it might seem to be, but with the current shifts in GNPs, the situation is not quite that simple. This essay considers Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*'s representation of global issues and also considers it as a case-study of how publishing contexts can impact on a text.

Of course, India is itself a major market for a writer such as Ghosh and his fiction, like that of many of his contemporaries, appeals to various and varied readership. In Ghosh's case, I would suggest, it demonstrated a particularly acute sensitivity to the problematics of its global positioning and multiple sites of reception. So one way in which one might read *The Hungry Tide* is as metafictional commentary on the situation of the South Asian-born writer, who is addressing a diverse readership. Bengal-born and now New York-based, Ghosh has lived in various

countries, including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the U.K, Algeria, Egypt, Italy and the U.S.

All of these countries figure in his writing, as do Iraq, Burma, Malaysia and Cambodia. Additionally, his first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) includes a long section set in an unnamed Gulf State, while his most recent work, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first part of a projected trilogy, ends with its characters taking ship for Mauritius and with hints that the trilogy may also be going to journey to the South China Seas. In short, both Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction travel.

As Robert Dixon puts it, Ghosh does not inhabit a culture rooted in a single place, but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generation in time'. Add to this the fact that all the Ghosh's books include carefully researched accounts of non-Western locations and from one point of view he would seem to be a model of the kind of writer that those Western publishers and literary agents are looking for, when they encourage budding authors to write about 'other' places. But unlike the Salman Rushdies and the Alexander McCall Smiths (to take as examples two very different writers whose output and reception can be seen to represent aspects of the alterity industry) Ghosh's writing, with the exception of *The Circle of Reason*, avoids fantasy.

His eclecticism is invariably rooted in historical – and geographical – materialism. More than just this: he demonstrates a particular alertness to the predicament of the cosmopolitan writer, interested in demonstrating the interconnectedness of global cultures, both in the present and the past, while avoiding descending into a glib universalism by always addressing the specifics that engender such connections.

In *The Hungry Tide*, a cetologist of Bengali parentage, Piyali Roy, comes to the Sundarbans or 'tide country' region of West Bengal to study the local river dolphins. Piya has grown up in Seattle and at the beginning of the novel she is said to be 'out of place' on a Kolkata station platform. She is out of place, particularly because of her clothes, which are

referred to as 'those of a teenage boy – loose cotton pants and an oversized white shirt' – and her 'close-cropped' hair, which in this context makes her seem 'androgyn[ous]', and because she does not speak Bengali.

Yet in another sense she is in place as an experienced traveler, whose work has taught her self-confidence and the ability to adapt to whatever environment she finds herself in. the nature of her profession has injured her to leading a solitary life, but her husband supposed self-sufficiency will be challenged by the people she meets in the Sundarbans. From the point of view of possible readership, Piya is a kind of outsider/insider figure, functioning both as a traveling expatriate character with whom non-Indian readers can identify and also, particularly because of her Indian ancestry, as a familiar figure for a middle-class, English-speaking Indian audience.

Her positioning in relation to the novel's setting is complemented by that of the novel's other main focalizer, a character who comes to the Sundarbans at the same time as she does: Kanai, a Delhi-based linguist who runs a translation agency and crucially, unlike Piya, speaks Bengali. So, if we view her as an outsider/insider, we might describe him the other way round: as an insider/outsider. He knows the region and speaks the language, but he has lived away from West Bengal.

Piya is a skilled Western professional who comes to one of the world's most delicately balanced ecosystem on a research trip that has clear ecological implications. Her equipment includes binoculars and a GPS (Global Positioning System) and these can be seen as a metonym for *The Hungry Tide's* concern with cross-cultural geographies and cosmopolitan perspectives on the local: as a work concerned with global issues set in a very specific South Asian location, a region with a uniquely varied biodiversity, the novel, too, is centrally engaged with how one sees and gives voice to the global.

The Hungry Tide dramatizes competing visions of place doing so, I would suggest, through using angles of vision that are consonant with its own positioning in relation to its subject-matter. Using focalizers who come from outside the Sundarbans, but in their different ways have some claim to belonging there, allows the novel to sidestep any suggestion that it is providing an 'authentic' insider view of the region, but at the same time avoids the danger of appearing to offer an ethnographic view of an 'other' place. Additionally, *The Hungry Tide* offers a welter of closely researched detail and foregrounds its own positioning, so that the effect that the main characters' vision has on the phenomena that they are observing is transparent; the so-called 'observer effect' (sometimes mistakenly referred to as 'the Heisenberg effect') is made abundantly clear. In short, whether or not Ghosh intends it, *The Hungry Tide* is a novel that engages with the problematics inherent in writing fiction about

very specific non-Western places, which can appeal to both domestic and global markets.

REFRANCES

1. A beautifully written story that pulled me into the life and times of the characters and the world experience. Very enjoyable.
2. aletheia21 [Feb. 17, 2007]
3. Booklist – Donna Seaman (starred review)
4. Biblio – Supriya Choudhuri
5. BCCJillster [Jun 30, 2008]
6. brarian [Jul 1, 2007]
7. eveningbookclub [Dec.17, 2007]
8. ebethe [March 31, 2007]
9. gigile [Sept. 16, 2008]